

The Role of Schools in Preventing Suicide



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Why Schools Should Address Suicide

- Suicide is the second leading cause of death for youth.
- Students' mental health can affect academic performance.
- The tragedy of suicide can have a lasting impact on a school community.
- School staff can play an important role in recognizing and responding to suicide risk.

Suicide Risk in Students, Ages 15–19



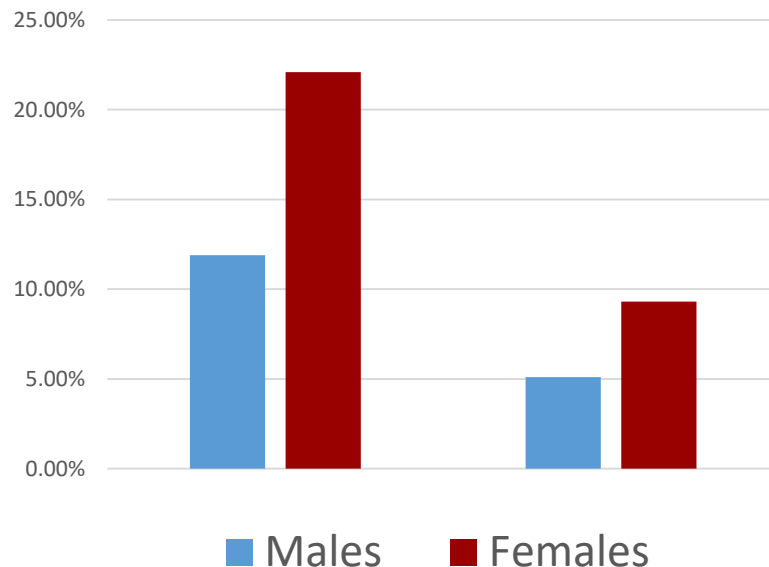
Youth Suicide Deaths, 2017

Rank	Ages 11–19
1	Unintentional injury 4,673
2	Suicide 2,996
3	Homicide 1,985
4	Malignant neoplasms 898
5	Heart disease 395

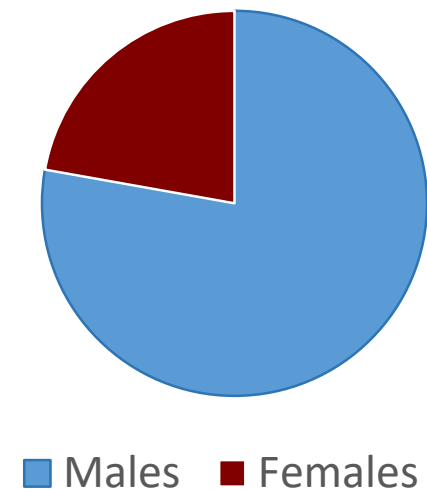
Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control. (2017). Web-based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System (WISQARS): Leading causes of death reports, 2017. [online]. Retrieved from <https://webappa.cdc.gov/cgi-bin/broker.exe>

Males vs. Females, Ages 15–19, 2017

Suicide Thoughts & Attempts



Deaths



Sources: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Kann, L., McManus, T., Harris, W. A., Shanklin, S. L., Flint, K. H., Queen, B., . . . Ethier, K. A. (2018). Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance—United States, 2017. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report: Surveillance Summaries*, 67(8), 1-114. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/67/ss/ss6708a1.htm>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics. (2017). CDC WONDER: Underlying cause of death 1999–2017: Data from multiple cause of death files, 2017 [online database]. Released December 2018. Retrieved from <http://wonder.cdc.gov/ucd-icd10.html>

Groups with Higher Suicide Risk

- Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth
- Latinas
- American Indians and Alaska Natives
- Rural youth

Sources: Suicide Prevention Resource Center (SPRC). (2013). Suicide among racial/ethnic populations in the U.S. Waltham, MA: Education Development Center; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). (2011). Sexual identity, sex of sexual contacts, and health-risk behaviors among students in grades 9–12: Youth risk behavior surveillance. Atlanta, GA: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; Fontanella, C. A., Hiance-Steelesmith, D. L., Phillips, G. S., Bridge, J. A., Lester, N., Sweeney, H. A., & Campo, J. V. (2015). Widening rural-urban disparities in youth suicides, United States, 1996–2010. *JAMA Pediatrics*, 169(5), 466–473. doi:10.1001/jamapediatrics.2014.3561

Risk & Protective Factors

- **Risk factors** – Characteristics that make it *more* likely that individuals will consider, attempt, or die by suicide
- **Protective factors** – Characteristics that make it *less* likely that individuals will consider, attempt, or die by suicide

Source: Suicide Prevention Resource Center, & Rodgers, P. (2011). *Understanding risk and protective factors for suicide: A primer for preventing suicide*. Newton, MA: Education Development Center, Inc.

Risk Factors

Examples

- Prior suicide attempt(s)
- Alcohol and drug abuse
- Mood and anxiety disorders, e.g., depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
- Access to a means to kill oneself, i.e., lethal means

Things Schools Can Do

- Offer social activities as alternatives to alcohol and substance use
- Encourage help-seeking
- Have agreements with mental health agencies
- Provide programming that targets bullying, substance use, and violence

Sources: Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). (2012). *Preventing suicide: A toolkit for high schools*. Retrieved from <http://store.samhsa.gov/product/Preventing-Suicide-A-Toolkit-for-High-Schools/SMA12-4669>

Protective Factors


Examples

- Effective mental health care
- Connectedness to individuals, family, community, and social institutions
- Problem-solving skills (managing anger and conflicts)
- Contacts with caring adults

Things Schools Can Do

- Ensure access to guidance staff and social workers
- Build school spirit through schoolwide projects
- Enhance life skills
- Take time to connect to students

Source: Suicide Prevention Resource Center, & Rodgers, P. (2011). *Understanding risk and protective factors for suicide: A primer for preventing suicide*. Newton, MA: Education Development Center, Inc.

A woman with blonde hair, wearing a striped shirt, is looking down at a device in her hands. The image is overlaid with a blue filter and a red triangle graphic in the top left corner. The text is centered over the image.

It's important to
learn about and to *act on*
the warning signs for suicide.

Warning Signs of Suicide



- Talking, writing, or texting about wanting to die or to kill oneself
- Looking for a way to kill oneself
- Talking about feeling hopeless or having no reason to live

Source: Suicide Prevention Resource Center. (2012). *The role of high school teachers in preventing suicide*. Retrieved from <http://www.sprc.org/sites/default/files/resource-program/Teachers.pdf>

Other Warning Signs



- Talking about feeling trapped or in unbearable pain
- Talking about being a burden to others
- Increasing the use of alcohol or drugs
- Acting anxious, agitated; behaving recklessly
- Sleeping too little or too much
- Withdrawing or feeling isolated
- Showing rage; talking about seeking revenge
- Displaying extreme mood swings

Source: Suicide Prevention Resource Center. (2012). *The role of high school teachers in preventing suicide*. Retrieved from <http://www.sprc.org/sites/default/files/resource-program/Teachers.pdf>

A Prepared School . . .

- Trains staff to recognize the warning signs of suicide
- Develops and disseminates a protocol for responding to students at risk of suicide
- Gets immediate help for students displaying the warning signs of suicide



Stigma and Fear



Asking about suicide thoughts does not cause someone to think about suicide.

Tell them you care about them and their safety.

Sources: Kalafat, J., & Elias, M. (1992). Adolescents' experience with and response to suicidal peers. *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior*, 22, 315–321; Zenere, F. J., & Lazarus, P. J. (1997). The decline of youth suicidal behavior in an urban, multicultural public school system following the introduction of a suicide prevention and intervention program. *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior*, 4, 387–403.

A Message of Hope

- Most youth considering suicide show warning signs.
- Nearly everyone who thinks about suicide is ambivalent.
- Most youth who think about suicide don't die by suicide.
- Showing that you care helps prevent suicide.

What Else Can Schools Do?

- Educate parents
- Educate and involve students
- Make formal agreements with mental health services
- Screen students for suicide risk

Source: Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). (2012). *Preventing suicide: A toolkit for high schools*. Retrieved from <http://store.samhsa.gov/product/Preventing-Suicide-A-Toolkit-for-High-Schools/SMA12-4669>

Commonly Asked Questions

- Should we educate youth about how to respond to peers at risk of suicide?
- Does talking about suicide cause suicidal thinking?
- Where can I find training for school staff?
- Are there examples of school policies and protocols for a suicide-related crisis?
- Where can I find information on responding appropriately to a death by suicide?
- Where can I find resources for parents?
- Youth spend a lot of time online. What are some suicide prevention resources for them?
- Are there resources for youth who have attempted suicide or have struggled with thoughts of suicide?
- What is the difference between a suicide attempt and non-suicidal self-harm?
- Where can I go for answers to other questions?

Other Services & Resources

- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA) *Preventing Suicide: A Toolkit for High Schools*: <https://store.samhsa.gov/product/Preventing-Suicide-A-Toolkit-for-High-Schools/SMA12-4669>
- Suicide Prevention Resource Center (SPRC): www.sprc.org.
- American Foundation for Suicide Prevention: www.afsp.org
- NAMI: www.nami.org
- American Association of Suicidality: www.suicidology.org
- Illinois Resources:
 - Illinois School Board of Education: *Illinois Youth Suicide Prevention Toolkit*: www.isbe.net
 - Elyssa's Mission:: www.elyssasmission.org
 - Erika's Lighthouse: www.erikaslighthouse.org

Thank you!

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